



## The Legacy

By Linda Lael Miller

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"She who loves and runs away, lives to love another day" was Jacy Tiernan's credo. Only this fair-haired beauty had never loved again after Ian Yarbro. Ten years ago, she had fled her beloved Australian homestead with a shattered soul. Ian, the rugged sheep rancher who'd awakened her young heart to the most exquisite pleasures, had sired the child of another woman. Unable to forgive him, Jacy ran off to New York to live with her wealthy, divorced mother, leaving behind all dreams of happiness. Now Jacy had returned to Corroboree Springs to care for her ailing father. And Ian was waiting, his heart as hard and defiant as the great Outback. Jacy knew she dared not love this proud and brooding man. Yet she also knew they could not deny the fevered passion that still blazed across them like bushfire. And when her father made a final wish that she and Ian wed, and unite their lands to ensure the future, Jacy realized she could no longer run. This time she would have to stand her ground and find the courage to turn a bitter clash of wills into a true bond... and Ian's burning hunger into sweet, everlasting ecstasy of love.

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is the author of more than a hundred historical and contemporary novels. Now living in Spokane, Washington, the “First Lady of the West” hit a career high when all three of her 2011 Creed Cowboy books debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* list. In 2007, the Romance Writers of America presented her their Lifetime Achievement Award. Visit her at [LindaLaelMiller.com](http://LindaLaelMiller.com).

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### Chapter One

Ian Yarbro was in no mood for a party.

Dingoes had brought down four of his best sheep just since Monday.

Water holes all over the property were coming up dry.

And worst of all, Jacy Tiernan, damn her, was back from America.

The first two plights were sorry ones, all right, but a man had to expect a fair portion of grief if he undertook to raise sheep in South Australia. That last bit, though, *that* was something personal, an individualized curse from God.

With a resounding sigh Ian leaned back against the south wall of the shearing shed, a mug of beer in one sore, lacerated hand, and scowled. Every muscle in his body throbbed, for he'd shorn more squirming woollies than any man on his crew in the days just past, and he felt as though he could sleep for a month, should the opportunity arise. That wasn't going to happen, of course, not with all he had to do around the place.

Ian took another sip from his beer, which had lost its appeal while he pondered his troubles, and surveyed the rustic festivities.

The music of the fiddles and mouth harps seemed to loop and swirl like invisible ribbon in the warm summer twilight. Shearers and roustabouts alike clomped round and round the long wooden floor of the shed, some dancing with women, some with each other. The night air was weighted with heat, since it was January, speckled with dust and bits of wool fiber and rife with the smells of sweat and brewer's yeast, cheap cologne and cigarette smoke.

And Jacy was back.

Ian muttered a curse. It had been bad enough, this past day or so, knowing Jacy was living right next door at Corroboree Springs, but at least she'd had the good grace to keep her distance. Until about five minutes before, that is, when she'd walked into the celebration with her father.

Ian could have ignored her completely, and would have, if it hadn't meant slighting Jake. Jacy's father was one of the best mates Ian had ever had, and he was just out of hospital as it was. Collie Kilbride had flown the pair of them, Jake and his daughter, up from Adelaide in his vintage plane the day before yesterday. If he

was going to live with himself, Ian reasoned sourly, he'd have to go over to Jake and shake his hand and tell him it was good to see him up and about again. No need for so much as a glance in Jacy's direction, as far as he could see, but if an acknowledgment was required, he'd just nod at her in the most civil fashion he could manage.

Frowning, he pushed away from the wall, tossed what remained of his beer through the open doorway of the shed, and handed the mug off to Alice Wigget as he passed her. Wending his way between the spinning couples was like moving through the gears of some enormous machine.

The colored light from the paper lanterns dangling from the rafters played in Jacy's fair hair, which just reached her shoulders and curled riotously around her face. She'd put on a bit of weight since he'd seen her last, as well. Too bad, Ian thought uncharitably, that it had all settled nicely into just the right places.

Drawing nearer still, Ian saw that Jacy's blue-green eyes were luminous with affection as she gazed up at her father's face. She was good at *looking* as if she gave a damn, but where had she been for all those years, while Jake's luck was getting worse and worse by the day? Where had she been when her dad's health had started failing?

Ian was seething by the time he reached them. He felt a muscle twitch in his cheek, set his jaw in an effort to control the response, then thrust out his hand to Jake.

"It's about time you got back and started tending your property, instead of leaving the whole place for your mates to look after," he said, half barking the words. Even though he tried hard, he couldn't force a smile to his mouth.

Jake, always good-natured and full of the devil, had no such problem. He beamed as he pumped Ian's hand, but his grasp was not the knuckle-crusher it had once been, and he was thin to the point of emaciation. There were deep shadows under Jake's pale blue eyes, and his face had a skeletal look about it.

"Well, then," Tiernan teased, "let's see what you've made of the job before you go complaining too loudly, Ian Yarbro. I've just been back for these two days, and for all I know, you've 'helped' me straight into the poorhouse."

Ian was painfully conscious of Jacy's nearness; he felt her gaze on him, caught the muted, musky scent of her perfume. And, God help him, he remembered too damned much about how things had been between them, once upon a time.

"Hello, Ian," she said. He felt her voice, too -- soft and smoky, evoking all kinds of sensory reactions.

She was going to force him to acknowledge her. He should have known it wouldn't be enough for her, just coming there and stirring up all those old memories again. He forced himself to look down into her upturned face and instantly regretted the decision. Jacy was twenty-eight now, as he was, and far more beautiful than she'd been at eighteen. He saw a flicker of some tentative, hopeful emotion in her eyes.

"Hello," he replied, and the word came out sounding gravelly and rusted, as though he hadn't used it in a long time. Jake and the shearers and the roustabouts and their women seemed to fade into a pounding void, and there was only Jacy. Ian hated knowing she could still affect him that way, and he hated her, too, for ripping open all the old wounds inside him.

The dancers pounded and thumped around them, shaking the weathered floorboards, and Ian had an unsteady feeling, as though he might tumble, headlong and helpless, into the depths of Jacy Tiernan's eyes. He didn't

notice that the music had stopped until it started again, louder than before, and strangely shrill.

Jake put one hand on Jacy's back and one on Ian's, then pushed them toward each other with a gentle but effective thrust. I think I'll sit this one out, he shouted, to be heard over the din, and then he stumped away through the crowd.

By no wish of his own Ian found himself holding his first love in his arms. He swallowed hard, battling a schoolboy urge to bolt, and began to shuffle awkwardly back and forth, staring over the top of her head. Jacy moved with him, and they were both out of step with the music.

Nothing new in that.

"Is it really so terrible," she asked, in the familiar Yankee accent that had haunted his memories for a decade, "dancing with me?"

"Don't," he warned. The word was part warning, part plea.

Ian felt exasperation move through Jacy's body like a current, though he was barely touching her.

"Will you just lighten up?" she hissed, standing on tiptoe to speak into his ear. "You're not the only one who's uncomfortable, you know!"

Ian's emotions were complex, and he couldn't begin to sort them out. That nettled him, for he was a logical man, and he hated chaos, especially within himself. He wanted to shake Jacy Tiernan for all she'd put him through, but he also wanted to make love to her. He was furious that she'd come back, but at one and the same time he felt like scrambling onto the roof and shouting out the news of her return.

He clasped her forearm -- it was bare and smooth, since she was wearing a sleeveless cotton sundress -- and half dragged her to the door and down the wooden ramp to the ground. The farmyard was filled with cars and trucks, and the homestead was a long, low shadow some distance away.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded in an outraged whisper.

Jacy raised her chin and put her hands on her hips. Her pale yellow dress seemed to shimmer in the rich light of the moon and stars, and her eyes sparked with silver fire. "That depends on what you mean by 'here,'" she retorted just as furiously. "If you mean why am I here at this damn party, then the answer is, because my father wanted to come and see all his friends and neighbors, and I came along to make sure he didn't overdo and land himself back in the hospital. If, on the other hand, you meant why am I in Australia, well, that should be obvious. My dad had a heart attack, and I'm here to look after him."

Ian was fairly choking on the tangle of things he felt; he might have turned and put a fist through the rickety wall of the shed if his hands hadn't already been swollen and cut from all the times he'd caught his own flesh in the clippers while shearing sheep. "Ten years you stayed away," he said instead. "*Ten years*. Do you think he didn't need you in all that time?" Do you think I didn't need you? he thought.

Her eyes brimmed with tears, and because Ian wasn't expecting that, he was wounded by the sight.

"Damn it, Ian," she said, "there's no need to make this so difficult! I'm here, and I plan to stay for an indefinite period of time. If you can't accept the fact, fine, just stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours. When we have the misfortune to run into each other, let's try to be civil, shall we? For Jake's sake, if nothing else."

Ian couldn't speak. He was reeling from her announcement that she wouldn't be leaving the area anytime soon. Only one thing would make him crazier than her absence, and that was having her live at Corroboree Springs day in and day out.

Naturally, she couldn't leave well enough alone and keep her mouth shut. Oh, no. That would never have done.

"Well?" she prompted with a sort of nasty sweetness.

Ian shoved a hand through his dark hair. With all the business of mustering and shearing the sheep, then dipping them in disinfectant to prevent infection in the inevitable scrapes and cuts and to keep the blowflies away, he'd let it grow too long, and it felt shaggy between his fingers.

"You should have stayed in America," he said stubbornly. "Jake has mates here. We'd have been glad to look after him, with no help from you."

She dried her eyes with the heel of one palm, smearing the stuff she wore on her lashes, and then tossed her head. "God, Ian, you can be *such* a bastard. Would it kill you to be polite, at least?"

"Would it have killed *you* to say good-bye before you left?" he snapped, regretting the words even as they tumbled from his mouth. "Even 'go to hell' or 'drop dead' would have been better than just leaving the way you did."

"So now it was all my fault!" she flared, making less of an effort to keep her voice down that time. "Has it escaped you that Elaine Bennett came up to us in front of the movie house in Yolanda and announced that she was carrying your baby?" She threw out her hands for emphasis. "But maybe you *did* forget. After all, you certainly never got around to mentioning that you'd been sleeping with her while we were going together!"

Ian tilted his head back and glared up at the stars. He didn't know why he bothered to tell her, since she'd never believe him, but the truth was all he had to offer. There had been many occasions in Ian's life when a lie would have been convenient, but he'd never gotten the knack of it. When he tried, he stuttered and his neck turned a dull red, so he'd long since given it up.

"Elaine and I were all through before I ever touched you, Jacy." He made himself meet her eyes and saw there the incredulity he'd feared all along. "And somewhere deep inside yourself, you know it. You knew it then. You just needed something to throw between us, some excuse to run away, because you were scared to death of what you were feeling!"

Jacy retreated a step and hugged herself as if a chill had struck her, even though it was nearly ten-thirty and stiff hot enough to smother a came]. "Okay, so I was scared," she murmured testily, but with less conviction than before. "I was only eighteen."

"So was I," Ian responded brusquely, giving no ground whatsoever. "And I was just as frightened as you were. But what I felt for you was real, and so was the hell I went through when you walked out on me."

It was all he could trust himself to say. He turned to walk away toward the long, one-story cement homestead he shared with his nine-year-old son, Chris, intending to wait out the party there. Chances were, no one would miss him.

She clasped his arm, and Ian stopped cold, bracing himself, refusing to turn and face her. "I'm sorry, Ian,"

she said. "Please believe that."

He wrenched free. It wasn't good enough, after the way he'd suffered. "Do us both a favor," he said, still refusing to look at her. "Go back to America and stay there." With that he strode off toward the dark and empty house, where the light and music of the party wouldn't reach, and it was he walking into his own soul.

Jacy stood watching as Ian disappeared into the shadows, trembling a little, flinching when she heard a door slam in the distance. She hadn't expected their first meeting in ten years to be easy -- not after the way things had ended for them -- but she hadn't anticipated anything so wrenching and difficult as this, either.

She needed time to compose herself, not wanting her dad and the friends, neighbors, and workers jammed into Ian's shearing shed to see how shaken she was, so she sat down on a crate in the shadows, drew a deep breath, and folded her arms. Some of the things Ian had said stuck in her spirit the way briars and nettles stuck in the sheeps' wool and the callused fingers of the shearers -- especially that bit about her being afraid of the love she'd felt for him. It had been as vast and deep as an ocean, that youthful adulation, full of treacherous beauty and alive with mysterious currents. She'd thought, sometimes, that the great waves would encompass her one day, and she'd drown.

Jacy sighed, looking up at the summer moon, mentally tracing its gray ridges and valleys of cold light. Another of Ian's accusations had struck its mark, too; she'd neglected her dad, keeping her distance those ten long years when she'd known how much her visits meant to him. It had been hard staying away, because she and lake had always been kindred souls, but she simply hadn't been ready to face Ian.

She still wasn't, she supposed, though she hadn't had much choice in the matter.

"Jacy-me-girl?"

Startled by her father's voice, gentle as it was, Jacy jumped a little and turned her head quickly.

Jake was standing at the base of the ramp, leaning on the cane he'd been using since he left the hospital. His heart attack had left him weakened and gaunt, and Jacy still hadn't gotten used to the change in him. He'd been so strong as a younger man, as vital and tireless as Ian, though always more good-natured.

"It didn't go well, then?" he asked in the fitting accent she loved.

Jacy blushed, knowing Jake had had hopes of his own for the evening. He had been a second father to Ian, since the elder Yarbros had passed on within a few years of each other, when Ian was still very young. Jake had never made secret of his belief that Jacy and Ian belonged together.

"It couldn't have been worse," she said with a sigh and a rueful, shaky smile. "Except if he'd drawn a gun and shot me, that is."

Jake made his way to the crate with a slow awkwardness that was painful to see, then took a seat beside his daughter "Give him time," he counseled. "Ian's a hardheaded sort, you know."

"I hadn't noticed," Jacy mocked, but she moved a little closer to her dad and let her head rest against his thin shoulder.

Jake patted her hand. "Once he works it all through, he'll come 'round."

Jacy stiffened. "I don't want him to come around, Dad. Not in the way you mean at least."

The glow of the moon only highlighted the amused skepticism in Jake's face. "Is that so? Then I'll confess to wondering why a simple shearing shed would be filled to the rafters with blue lightning from the moment the two of you spotted one another. There was so much electricity flying about in there that I'd have been afraid to step in a puddle of spilled beer."

Jacy Couldn't help smiling at his description of the tension that had coiled between her and Ian earlier in the evening. She slipped her arm around Jake and said, "I've missed you a whole lot."

Don't be changing the subject," he replied, his accent thicker than ever. It happened whenever he was being mischievous or having trouble controlling his emotions. This is a small community, and you and Ian won't be able to avoid each other forever. You'll need to settle things."

She linked her fingers with her dad's and squeezed. Jake had a point; Ian's property bordered their own, and if that wasn't enough, they were bound to meet in nearby Yolanda, in the post office and the shops. Or in Willoughby, the slightly larger town fifty kilometers to the northeast, where homesteaders and townspeople alike went to see the doctor, purchase supplies, and attend to various other errands that couldn't be taken care of in Yolanda.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to come back to the States with me, just until you're feeling strong again?" she ventured, though she knew as she spoke what the answer would be. Jake had nothing against America -- he'd married a Yank, after all -- but he'd often said he was no more suited to the place than a kangaroo was to Manhattan.

He simply arched an eyebrow.

"All right," Jacy burst out. "Then we'll go up to Cairns again, like we did when I was twelve. We could collect seashells and lie out in the sun and eat those wonderful giant avocados." She still had some of the colorful shells she'd gathered back then, displayed on a shelf in her room at the homestead. To her the shells symbolized eternity and the extravagant, careless continuity of life. "We could leave tomorrow. What do you say?"

"I say that you're trying to run away again." Jake paused, still gripping her hand, to study the spectacular display of stars, their majesty undimmed by the lights of any city. When he looked at her again, the expression in his eyes was sad and gentle. "You've done enough of that in your young life, Jacy. It's time to stop now, and face matters head on."

She averted his eyes, afraid of all that was in her heart, good and bad, noble and ignoble, terrified that all those mixed-up emotions would spill over and disgrace her if she let down her guard for so much as a moment. There was no point in denying her father's words anyway, because he was right -- Jacy's unspoken credo had always been *She who loves and runs away, lives to love another day.*

Only she had never loved again. Not before Ian, and certainly not after.

"What do I do now?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Nothing much," Jake replied easily, tenderly. "Just stand still for a time, Jacy-me-girl. That's all. Just hold your ground and see what comes toward you."

She laughed, but the sound resembled a sob. "What if it's a freight train?"

Jake chuckled, slipped an arm around her shoulders, and gave her a brief hug. "See that you don't stand on



the railroad tracks, love. Now let's take ourselves home, shall we? I'm tuckered."

Jacy was relieved to be leaving Ian's place. At the same time she was worried about Jake's physical condition. "You're all right, aren't you?" she asked, peering at him anxiously. "We could drive over to Willoughby and see the doctor, just to be on the safe side -- "

"And rouse the poor bloke from his bed?" Jake spoke amicably, as he almost always did, but Jacy knew the suggestion had annoyed him because he shook off her hand when she tried to help him stand. "Get a grip on yourself, sheila. I can't go waltzing off to the doctor every time I feel a bit worn down, now can I?"

Wisely, Jacy said nothing. She just walked along at Jake's side, and when they reached his dusty old truck she got behind the wheel and left him to hoist himself into the vehicle on his own.

Jacy rose early the next morning, even before Jake was up. It was her third day back, but she was still greedy for the sights and sounds and smells of the place. She loved the house, with its green lawn and sheltering pepper trees and the old-fashioned roses Grandmother Matty had planted at one end of the veranda. Loved the shed, although there were no horses there now, and the paddocks, though there were no sheep. As little time as she had spent there, the homestead and the land surrounding it were dear to her in a way her mother and stepfather's luxurious townhouse in Manhattan had never been.

She lingered on the veranda for a while, watching the sunlight sparkle and dance on the surface of the spring-fed pond a little distance away, in the midst of a copse of thirsty trees. From there the water flowed away through the paddock in a wide stream, eventually forming the border between the Tiernan land and Merimbula, the huge cattle station to the south.

Standing still, she heard her mother's voice in her mind. "You are an Aussie through and through," Regina had often said, always adding a long sigh for effect. "It's in your blood, that hot, lonely, harsh place, and for that, my darling, I offer you my sincerest apologies."

Jacy smiled. She'd spent most of her life in America, but there was an element of truth in her mother's words. She was an Aussie, in so many ways.

Some of her pleasure faded. Despite her Australian heritage, Ian and not a few other people would always view her as an outsider. It would be naïve to believe her former lover was the only one who thought she'd failed Jake by staying away all those years; in the bush, where everyday life was a challenge, abandoning someone was just about the worst thing a person could do. A betrayal of one was a betrayal of all, and the homesteaders around Yolanda had long, long memories where such matters were concerned.

She turned reluctantly and went back into the cool shelter of the house.

Jake was still sleeping, apparently, so she returned to her own room and pulled Grandmother Matty's handmade quilt off the bed. The coverlet hadn't been washed in a long time, and it had a musty smell to it.

In the homestead's primitive kitchen Jacy heated water on the gas-powered stove, making as little noise as possible then she rinsed out the quilt in the kitchen sink, wrung it gently, and carried it out to the clothesline in back of the house. When it was drying in the warm morning sun she brewed a cup of tea and sat on the back step to drink it, watching with delight as a mob of kangaroos sprang across the paddock separating her father's property from Ian's.

She was exhausted, and not just from the hasty trip across the international date line, after she'd learned

about Jake's heart attack, and the long vigil at the hospital in Adelaide that had followed. There were troubles waiting back in the States, snarls to untangle, things that, true to form, she'd run away from.

The way she'd run away from Ian.

"Ian." She spoke the name softly, but aloud, and it hurt more than she would ever have expected. Memories overtook her like a bushfire; tears stung her eyes, a sob escaped her, and finally she knew it was futile to try to hold back her grief any longer. She wept in earnest.

When the personal storm was over Jacy sniffled, tilted her head back, and closed her puffy eyes. Scenes from that awful time ten years before played on the screen of her mind in Technicolor and stereo.

She made herself walk through the memories, facing them one by one. Having done that, she reasoned, she might be able to look Ian in the eye the next time they met without losing her dignity.

Jacy saw in her thoughts a smaller and wilder version of her sophisticated twenty-eight-year-old self, a sunburned waif in blue jeans. Her dark blond hair had been short then, and she'd ridden all over the property, and some parts of those adjoining it, on her aging white mare, Biscuit. She'd been free as a gypsy in those days, knowing nothing of heartache. Even her parents' divorce hadn't truly touched her, for she'd been too young to remember leaving the homestead with her mother, and she'd made the long trip Down Under often throughout her childhood to stay with Jake.

Ian, like Jacy, had been just eighteen the year the world turned upside down, but more man than boy even then. He'd already begun taking over the responsibilities of running the property he'd inherited from his father.

Jacy had fallen in love with Ian at a spring party much like the one the night before, after the shearing had been done and the wool baled and sent off to Adelaide in semis to be sold. Miracle of miracles, he had felt the same way about her, or said he did, at least, and in secret places on her father's property and his own he had taught her to glory in her womanhood. He had introduced her to the most excruciatingly sweet pleasures, and, in fact, no man had touched her so intimately since.

They'd planned to marry, over Jacy's mother's frantic long-distance protests. Regina Tiernan Walsh was strong and smart, but she'd entered into a rash marriage in a foreign land herself once, and subsequently her bridegroom, Australia, and her own disillusionment had combined forces to break her heart. Not surprisingly, Regina had been terrified that the same fate awaited her daughter.

In the end, though, it had been Elaine Bennett, daughter of the American manager of Merimbula Station, who had brought Jacy's dreams down with a soul-shattering crash. She'd come up to Jacy and Ian outside the theater in Yolanda, looked Ian straight in the eye, and told him she was going to have his baby.

Even after a decade Jacy could still feel the terrible shock of that moment and the helpless, fiery rage that had followed. Ian had not denied the accusation; neither had he troubled himself to explain or apologize. He'd simply expected Jacy to understand.

A distant bleating sound jolted Jacy from her musings, and she rose slowly from her seat on the step. Way off she saw a sea of recently shorn sheep approaching, kicking up the dry red dust as they came.

Jacy's heart rose immediately to her throat and lodged there, impassable. The sheep were Ian's -- she had no doubt of that -- on their way to the springs to drink.

For a few moments she nursed her scant hope that someone else would be driving the flock, or mob, as the locals called it -- one of Ian's two or three hired men, maybe. Even before Ian himself came into view, however, mounted on that enormous liver-colored stallion Jake had written her about, she knew she couldn't be so lucky.

She wasn't ready, she thought frantically.

Not so soon.

The baaing and bleating of the sheep grew until the racket filled Jacy's skull and stomach, and she watched the mob divide like water coursing around a stone. Two lean dogs kept the odd-looking beasts moving when they would have stopped to nibble the grass in the yard, and great clouds of red dust billowed in the hot, still air, covering the freshly washed quilt with grit.

Jacy just stood there on the back step like a felon on the scaffold, waiting for the noose to tighten around her neck. Her clothes -- jeans and a white T-shirt -- felt all wrong, her hair probably looked like hell, and she hadn't bothered to put on makeup. She'd never felt less prepared for anything.

She figured she'd be really upset about the quilt once her thoughts calmed down, but at the moment she was too distracted.

In the dazzling light of a summer day it was plain that Ian's features had hardened with maturity. His violet gaze seemed to slice through her spirit, cutting cleanly, leaving no jagged edges.

Her knees went weak, and she sagged onto the step. Jet lag, she insisted to herself, though it had been more than three weeks since she'd landed in Adelaide.

Ian was wearing perfectly ordinary clothes -- a battered stockman's hat; a blue cambric workshirt, the front of which was stained with sweat; jeans and boots -- and yet the sight of him stole Jacy's breath away.

"How's Jake this morning?" he asked, shouting to be heard over the last of the sheep and swinging down from the saddle. There was nothing cordial in the question; she could see by his expression that things hadn't changed since the night before.

"See for yourself," she replied, amazed that the words had gotten past her constricted throat. Her heart was pounding like a ceremonial drumbeat, and she feared she might be sick to her stomach.

Ian tethered the horse to a rusted hitching post, resettled his hat, and crossed the yard to stand facing her. "See for myself I will," he answered in that low, rumbling voice that had once urged her to passion and then consoled her afterward, when she'd feared that all the scattered pieces of her soul would never find their way back to her. "If you'll just get out of my way."

Jacy looked straight into those impossibly blue eyes, and her heart shattered all over again. She rose and turned her back on Ian, praying he wouldn't guess how shaken she was.

"Dad was sleeping before your sheep came tramping through here like a herd of buffalo," she said in a moderately acidic tone. She could feel him behind her, though of course they weren't touching, feel the heat and hardness of him in the small of her back, the space between her shoulder blades and her nape, the tender flesh of her thighs and the insides of her knees. "I don't suppose you noticed what those creatures did to my clean quilt."

They entered the kitchen.

"I don't suppose I did," Ian said, utterly without remorse.

"I'll tell Jake you're here."

"Thanks for that much, anyway," Ian grumbled. In an involuntary backward glance Jacy saw him hang his hat on a peg beside the door and shove splayed fingers through his hair.

Suddenly the old anger crashed through all her carefully constructed defenses, swamping her, and it took every ounce of Jacy's self-control to keep her voice calm and even. "What did you expect, Ian? That I'd welcome you with open arms? That I'd thank you for teaching me that love has fangs?"

Ian's jawline hardened, but before he could speak, Jake appeared in the inside doorway, leaning on his cane.

"Hello, mate," he said. "I wondered when you'd get round to paying an old man a visit."

Ian's laugh was a low burst of sound, only too well remembered by Jacy and somehow excluding her. "You think I've got nothing better to do than eat biscuits and sip tea with the likes of you, Jake Tiernan?"

Jacy hurried outside before her father could suggest that she put the kettle on. She'd eat a bale of raw wool before she'd make tea and fetch cookies for Ian Yarbro. If he wanted refreshments, he could damn well serve himself.

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